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How to completely, utterly destroy an employee's work life

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Recall your worst day at work, when events of the day left you frustrated, unmotivated by the job, and brimming with disdain for your boss and your organization. That day is probably unforgettable. But do you know *exactly* how your boss was able to make it so horrible for you? Our research provides insight into the precise levers you can use to re-create that sort of memorable experience for your own underlings.

Over the past 15 years, we have studied what makes people happy and engaged at work. In discovering the answer, we also learned a lot about misery at work. Our research method was pretty straightforward. We collected confidential electronic diaries from 238 professionals in seven companies, each day for several months. All told, those diaries described nearly 12,000 days – how people felt, and the events that stood out in their minds. Systematically analyzing those diaries, we compared the events occurring on the best days with those on the worst.

What we discovered is that the key factor you can use to make employees miserable on the job is to simply keep them from making progress in meaningful work.

People want to make a valuable contribution, and feel great when they make progress toward doing so. Knowing this progress principle is the first step to knowing how to destroy an employee's work life. Many leaders, from team managers to CEOs, are already surprisingly expert at smothering employee engagement. In fact, on *one-third* of those 12,000 days, the person writing the diary was either unhappy at work, demotivated by the work, or both.

That's pretty efficient work-life demolition, but it leaves room for improvement.

Step 1: Never allow pride of accomplishment. When we analyzed the events occurring on people's very worst days at the office, one thing stood out: setbacks. Setbacks are any instances where employees feel stalled in their most important work or unable to make any meaningful contribution. So, at every turn, stymie employees' desire to make a difference. One of the most effective examples we saw was a head of product development, who routinely moved people on and off projects like chess pieces in a game for which only he had the rules.

The next step follows organically from the first.

Step 2: Miss no opportunity to block progress on employees' projects. Every day, you'll see dozens of ways to inhibit substantial forward movement on your subordinates' most important efforts. Goal-setting is a great place to start. Give conflicting goals, change them as frequently as possible, and allow people no autonomy in meeting them. If you get this formula just right, the destructive effects on motivation and



performance can be truly dramatic.

Step 3: Give yourself some credit. You're probably already doing many of these things, and don't even realize it. That's okay. In fact, unawareness is one of the trademarks of managers who are most effective at destroying employees' work lives. As far as we could tell from talking with them or reading their own diaries, they generally thought their employees were doing just fine – or that “bad morale” was due to the employees' unfortunate personalities or poor work ethics. Rarely did they give themselves credit for how much their own words and actions made it impossible for people to get a sense of accomplishment. You may be better at this than you think!

Step 4: Kill the messengers. Finally, if you do get wind of problems in the trenches, deny, deny, deny. And if possible, strike back. Here's a great example from our research. In an open Q&A with one company's chief operating officer, an employee asked about the morale problem and got this answer: “There is no morale problem in this company. And, for anybody who thinks there is, we have a nice big bus waiting outside to take you wherever you want to look for work.”

A good quote to keep in your back pocket.

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